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The methodology trap – Why media and communication studies are not really international

Abstract: Theoretical concepts that explain transnational mass or social communication are rather unsophisticated. After twenty years of research on media 'globalization', academic thinking in this field is still vague and definitely requires more effort. One reason as to why theory is so unconvincing is that most researchers are experts for the 'translocal' but not for the 'local'. Our language skills and methodologies are particularly limited when we try to understand if and how transnational media *do* or *do not* affect non-Western societies. To get out of this methodology trap we need a better integration of media studies and the so-called area studies. Currently, media and communication studies, despite all efforts, are 'international' only in a very limited sense. There is a dire need for better integration of Asian, African, Latin American, North African and Middle Eastern media studies into theoretical debates.

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1 A collection of curious of theoretical dead ends

Many of the theoretical concepts that have been in use for the last twenty years are intellectual dead ends. The 'global public sphere' is among them. The Habermasian vision of a rational public discourse has never been fully realized in the national arena. Habermas himself bemoaned a second structural transformation of modern mass media in which the media industries have increasingly monopolized the realm of bourgeois reasoning for their own commercial ends (Habermas, 1991). Feminist and leftist challengers of Habermas criticized the philosopher's own limitations to rational – instead of emotional and ritual – and bourgeois – instead of socially inclusive – public discourse. Habermas himself reacted to his critics by refining his concept in the model of "center and peripheries" of the public sphere (Habermas, 1996). With the advent of the internet and direct satellite broadcasting, scholars started reflecting whether the national public sphere could be extended to a global public sphere – but it

soon became obvious that Habermas' concept is even less convincing when transferred to the international arena. The worldwide media are not co-oriented towards the same agenda, the global news agenda is only the "tip of the iceberg" of news produced all around the world (Hafez, 2007). Entertainment and music are certainly more global than news, and a small information elite around the world uses means of direct communication across borders through internet, satellite TV and the like. But the bulk of people remains solidly entrenched in national language media environments with limited global agendas, nationally and culturally branded discourses and all the problems inherent to such provincial world views. Many of the minimal requirements existing in national public spheres do not exist in the international arena, not even in a fairly integrated sphere like the European Union, which in times of the pending financial crises produces highly antagonistic national images of 'Nazi Germans' and 'lazy Greeks'. The reason behind this is that media markets are in many ways not interdependent but rather local even where they remain open for international capital. As early as 1998, Colin Sparks warned of the fact that the public sphere is not yet a "global public sphere", but until now the theoretical refinement is still missing which is needed to understand if, when and under which circumstances a global discourse does occur.

The 'world or global media system' is another flawed concept. Steven Reese once defined global journalism as a system of "newsgathering, editing and distribution not based on national or regional boundaries" (Reese, 2008). However, most news production is in fact local or regional – in geolinguistic regions –, and many of the deep structures of media systems are national and not transnational. Interconnections are technically there, but local media capital, local media policies and local audiences dominate. Nick Couldry was absolutely correct when arguing that we need a better understanding of what comprises the world media system (Couldry, 2006). I would even go further and argue that a system in which transnational interdependencies are rare and instable does not even deserve to be called a world media system – it is rather a loose corporate network.

Transnational and transcultural social networks exist worldwide, but to what extent are we living in a 'global civil society'? Mass media are surely not the only transnational communicative actors anymore, and have probably never been. But to what degree are transnational social media socially relevant? Is the internet a global or rather a local medium? By far the most internet links and interactions remain within the national realm. Moroever, we have a 'Babylonian' reality out there with big local languages more and more dominating the web and also virtual community exchanges. Social media might be important locally, for example, during the 'Arab Spring' in Tunisia and Egypt,

although even those revolutionary events were a complex mix of oral communication in social encounters and gatherings and mediatized communication in social media and mass media (Lynch, 2011). I was in Egypt during the first weeks of the revolution – it was definitely not a mere 'Facebook revolution'. And it certainly was not an event fabricated by global networkers from outside the Arab world. Even though there was some technical international assistance to bypass regime censorship on the Arab internet, the main trend towards cross-border communication occurred within a regional framework and incorporated the worldwide Arab diaspora (Harb, 2011). Regional groups that had already existed for some time such as 'Cyberdissidents.com', a coalition of Middle Eastern internet activists, played a significant role. The growing importance of the Arab language as the lingua franca of internet activists was an expression of the regionalization or geocultural spread of political activism in the Arab-speaking world. In theoretical terms, therefore, we have to differentiate between the modernization and the globalization of communication. In many ways, technical tools might be Western or global, but interactions in civil society networks follow the same geolinguistic logic of monolingualism that exist in the mass media sector. It is true that the modernization of communication gives rise to post-traditional communities all over the world (Krotz, 2008). But post-traditionalism can also be 'neo-traditionalism' when revitalizing language communities.

2 The methodology trap

If global communication cannot be described as being a 'sphere', a 'system' or a 'social network' and if transnational communication might grow but local communication grows even faster: What type of societies does that produce? Transcultural changes can affect us – but the real dividing line might not be *between* the 'local', the 'regional' and the 'global' but within all these realms. There are information elites and masses everywhere, centers and peripheries of globalization, and multiple velocities of globalization can be observed. Do we live in 'one' or in 'multiple' modernities? Transnational independencies of media systems exist but they are often loose and compete with far more solid national relations. What we need are theories that understand the relative shifts in our life worlds that analyze the social fabric and political impact of media changes at various places in the world.

In order to improve our theory we need new methodologies
– that overcome the often superficial knowledge of non-Western societies and get in touch with specialized disciplines of the Oriental, African, Latin American and Asian studies,
– which are aware of non-Western languages
– and that comprise global media studies as a field of comparative studies.

For media studies in the west to remain 'international', it will no longer suffice to know western theories and somehow claim that media studies are intrinsically interdisciplinary – because they are not. The average western media scholar might be aware of general theories in social sciences, but he or she hardly ever speaks non-western languages or is an expert of non-western countries. The problem is not an essential claim to non-Western theory building, but we need theoretical refinement because processes 'overseas' might not differ completely from the west but they can occur as specific variations of theoretical formations. Although occasional cooperation between media and area studies does exist, media analysis in both fields is to a large extent separated – interdisciplinary cooperation is the exception, not the rule.

The standard rebuttal would be that scholars of area studies in general have usually little theoretical knowledge, particularly in the field of media and communication. This is certainly true, but area specialists know the languages and the local fields, and if there is a tendency on their side to ignore social science theories, there are also signs of a growing awareness of theoretical deficits. Young area scholars have started to express their 'discomfort' with Islamic studies, to mention but one of their branches (Poya and Reinkowski, 2008). They have started to question 'Western' concepts as universal blueprints for a better understanding of non-western societies (e.g., Chakrabarty, 2008). A real hype in media-oriented area studies is made of "media anthropology" (Askew and Wilk, 2002). To which degree media anthropology really offers theories and methodologies or if it is merely a 'fake tool' that avoids theoretical and methodological work, is an open question.

The potential which area studies research could have for media and communication studies cannot possibly be fully outlined in an article like this. However, even a cursory look at bibliographies of some of the major works on global communication that are important for theoretical debate reveals the extent to which analyses related to media and communication that are currently prepared in the area studies are ignored and are hardly ever referred to in media and communication studies (see, e.g., Herman and McChesney, 1997; Löffelholz and Weaver, 2008; McPhail, 2010; Morley and Robins, 1995; Volkmer, 1999). The deficits can only be grasped when the literature used in such books on

globalization is compared to the impressive corps of academic literature on media in the area studies that is published in various academic journals and books in English, French and other Western languages all around the world – not to mention publications in non-Western languages (for a first impression, see the bibliographies of GIGA, 2013; Hafez and Reinknecht, 2001; Hansen, 2002).

In any case, there is a growing tendency in area studies to analyze media and communication. More or less unnoticed by mainstream media and communication scholars, their colleagues in other disciplines opened up their own academic magazines like "Arab Media and Society", "Arab and Muslim Media Research" or the "Journal of Muslim Culture and Communication". This was certainly a reaction to the fact that mainstream media studies journals are not international enough to cope with the specific interests area researchers have, for instance, in Cambodian media. While area magazines have published special issues on such topics, case studies of non-western media remain marginal in western media and communication science. The result of all this is a growing disintegration of media and communication research in various academic disciplines.

3 Conclusion

Media and communication studies in Europe and North America have debated global communication for decades, but their theoretical concepts are still vague. The major reason behind it is that we are trying to understand the world on the basis of a few mechanical ideas of what comprises transnational communication. It is only if we start and understand non-Western societies, their media and audiences, that we will be able to understand global communication. Daya Thussu is absolutely correct when arguing that a real internationalization with "innovative research methodologies" that incorporate non-Western media studies is a necessary "third intervention" into media and communication studies after feminism and cultural studies (Thussu, 2009; see also: Banerjee, 2009). Without improved interdisciplinary and intercultural cooperation with other social sciences and in particular with Latin American, Oriental, African and Asian studies, and without more comparative approaches to transnationalization, media and communication studies will no longer be at the forefront of academic disciplines explaining 'globalization' but will instead lose their drive for internationalization.

Bionote

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